

2010 Amherst Community Development Strategy Update

For more than three decades, the Town of Amherst has consistently pursued and worked to implement a combination of development, conservation, and community service strategies according to principles that have since come to be called “**sustainable development**.” While the community’s development and conservation strategies have had consistent support, the detailed implementation of Amherst’s CDS has often been subject to lively debate. Despite controversies relating to implementation, Amherst has accomplished a remarkable list of achievements.

Beginning in 2005 Amherst began the development of a new Master Plan. This Master Plan attempted to capture the community’s aspirations and confront the challenges that Amherst faces – the struggle to maintain its quality of life in the face of fiscal challenges exacerbated by diminishing state tax support. A significant amount of land in Amherst is permanently protected and the development of remaining unprotected open space continues, primarily for expensive single-family housing. Demographic changes and University expansion continue to put pressure on housing and Town services. And land costs and housing costs continue to rise. These and other interrelated issues impact the lives of individual residents as well as the future of the community as a whole. By addressing issues of growth and development, this Plan also seeks to preserve and enhance the character of Amherst community life—fundamental civility, access to public resources and decision-making, cohesive neighborhoods, ongoing cultural activities, and the preservation of longstanding community-defining traditions in the face of the change and fluidity imposed by a highly transient population.

This Master Plan—Amherst’s first in nearly 40 years—seeks to create a framework for addressing the challenges and realizing the aspirations of the Amherst community. The Plan uses words, maps, and illustrations to describe shared expectations for the types, location, and intensity of future development. It also outlines an implementation schedule for the actions necessary to achieve the Plan’s objectives. This Community Development Strategy is based on and reflects the conclusions of the Master Plan as it now exists. The following Community Development goals reflect the goals that have been incorporated in the Master Plan and are as follows:

Encourage vitality in the downtown and village centers:

I. Historically the Town has developed policies that reinforce existing village centers while preserving a connected network of open lands between.

The Master Plan establishes the following as a key direction for future planning:

Amherst’s downtown and village centers should be a focus for the community’s economic activity. Vitality in these areas can be pursued through a variety of initiatives, including encouraging additional housing development that includes affordable housing, economic investment, expansion of cultural facilities, promotion of a mix of uses, and improvements to the public realm (parks, streetscapes, and public squares and accessibility). These initiatives will lead to a more walkable community, allow for more day-to-day interactions among residents, and attract more visitors to the community while enhancing Amherst’s growing tourism industry. For example The Amherst Design Review Board, Planning Department, and Public Works Department continue to make plans for the revitalization of all Village Centers, including making them accessible for individuals with all abilities. As part of this process Town departments and citizens want to ensure that the Village Center is also accessible and safe for individuals of all abilities.

The map of Amherst’s downtown and village centers, which should be a focus for the community’s economic life, cultural vigor, and social zoning districts, is appended to the CDS. It documents the progress made in seeking to concentrate development in desired areas, and limit or avoid development in conservation areas. Town Meeting has already made significant changes in the Town’s Zoning By-Law to promote Village Center Development. The Planning Department is working with developers who are

interested in developing mixed use projects in Village Centers and the Town is facilitating a major industrial project just adjacent to the North Amherst Village Center.

Balance land preservation objectives with more intensive development in appropriate areas

II. For decades, the community has consistently supported efforts to preserve and improve the natural and visual environment of the town. Amherst values its historic, cultural, and social environment just as highly. Illustrating how Amherst seeks to balance development and preservation, the 2004 *Amherst Preservation Plan* lays out strategies for protecting and interpreting Amherst's historic, historic archeological, and pre-historic archeological resources. The plan proposes sustaining Amherst's historic "village cluster" character as a community preservation strategy, along with fostering greater knowledge of and appreciation for Amherst's past. East Amherst Village, for instance, played a unique role as Amherst's earliest economic and political center. Amherst has managed to preserve and maintain a remarkable percentage of its open space in active agriculture. Farming and farmland are highly valued as historic, cultural, recreational and scenic resources for community life. The town continues to preserve important open space funding from the CPA as well as the Kestrel Trust, a Trust whose mission it is to preserve important open space including valuable farm land and land that protects Amherst's water supply.

The Master Plan establishes the following:

Perhaps the most significant theme that surfaced throughout the *Planning Amherst Together* process is the need to protect the Town's significant open spaces, including wildlife habitats, farmland, recreational lands, scenic vistas, and environmentally sensitive areas. Conservation of large tracts of land will require trade-offs in other areas. For example, in order to deal with rising land prices that can result from reducing the supply of buildable land, higher density development must be allowed, especially in Village Centers and incentives must be developed to direct more growth and increased economic activity to the appropriate areas. A mix of uses should likewise be promoted to encourage more walkable communities and bring residents closer to jobs, shops, and services. This Master Plan tries to address these trade-offs, striking a balance between land preservation and the need for intensified responsible development in Amherst.

Provide housing that meets the needs of all residents while minimizing impacts on the environment:

III. The 2003 *Affordable Housing Plan* is clear about the need to find ways to develop new affordable housing, especially in Village Centers, as well as the importance of maintaining and upgrading the physical condition of existing affordable residential structures, especially when housing is not in compliance with existing building codes. Over 20% of Amherst's housing stock was built prior to 1939 and keeping existing properties livable is an important strategy in sustaining the availability of affordable housing. The Affordable Housing Plan and the Master Plan also recognize the importance of 'in-fill' development or reuse of existing structures in appropriate areas, especially in or around village centers as an important strategy in increasing affordable housing for low- and moderate-income households

Amherst is one of the very few communities to exceed the state's 10% affordable housing threshold—the most recent DHCD listing indicates that 11.3% of Amherst's housing stock meets the requirements for state listing as affordable housing. A recent Town Meeting approved the purchase of property on Main Street in East Amherst Village for the development of affordable housing. The Town's FY 06 CDBG application requested funding to support this construction project as responsible infill in East Amherst Village Center. This project is now complete and awaiting a Certificate of Occupancy. Numerous provisions of Amherst's Zoning Bylaw promote or require the provision of affordable

housing in new development. Amherst continues to work to maintain diversity of housing choice for the sake of protecting the community's diversity. The Town has owned a parcel of land that was taken in 1988 by eminent domain for the purpose of developing affordable housing. To date this land remains vacant and therefore the development of this parcel has become a priority for the Housing Partnership and the Town. The Town is currently providing funding (CPA funds) for the development of schematic design and cost estimates for housing on the parcel. Depending on the results of this project, the Town will dispose of this property for either an affordable home ownership development or an affordable rental development. The percent of units available to low- and moderate-income households has yet to be determined. The Town is also working with a private group, the Interfaith Housing Corporation (which will contribute a significant amount of funds), to renovate a small apartment building, within the vicinity of Amherst Center, to house up to 20 currently homeless individuals.

The Housing Partnership also supports First-time Homebuyer programs that provide financial counseling and financing options to low- and moderate-income households that will insure they are able to take advantage of affordable housing option as well as prevent foreclosure. This includes developing programs that might, for example, provide mortgage subsidies in the form of deferred loan payments to low- and moderate-income households. In addition the Housing Partnership, the Community Development Committee and the Committee on Homelessness are very concerned about the lack of housing for homeless individuals and hope to increase the availability of housing through the construction of an SRO or the renovation of an existing facility to accomplish this purpose. Prior Community Development activities have included preserving existing housing stock by providing a remedy for a serious drainage problem at an existing affordable housing development, renovating 30 kitchens at a development for low- and moderate-income elders and disabled individuals and provided \$350,000 for 11 units of affordable rental housing on Main St. in Amherst.

The Master Plan establishes the following goals:

Amherst values its economic and cultural diversity. Sustaining this diversity now and into the future will require addressing the needs of large segments of the population, including both renters and homeowners, that are financially strained by rising housing costs. It is critically important to encourage a broad mix of housing types with a full range of initiatives designed to preserve, develop, and/or replenish the community's low and moderate income affordable housing inventory. Housing strategies must also ensure that the mix of housing in the Town meets the physical needs of residents and is affordable to the broadest spectrum of a growing community while minimizing the impact of housing development on the environment.

Provide community services to meet the needs of all residents.

IV. Amherst has consistently supported social service activities that promote increased employment opportunities. The high cost of child care prevents full employment for many low- and moderate-income families. In 1985, Town Meeting established the Children's Services Department and the Advisory Committee on Children's Services to address the local need for quality affordable child care. The Amherst School Department continues to receive funding from the Department of Education for tuition support for low- and moderate-income families with three- and four-year old children. There is, however, inadequate financial support for low- and moderate-income families with infants and toddlers and pre-school age children. The Town also consistently supports social services that improve the quality of life for all Amherst residents, reducing stress and increasing a household's options for meaningful employment. Town Meeting has funded a range of social services, that include case management support for low- and moderate-income families [especially for those whose first language is not English], mentoring, services for battered women, and others. The Town will consistently seek funding for these and other social services programs that address issues of relating to poverty, health care, family planning, financial stress and others as the needs arise. The priority this year is to continue and expand Town funded social service activities. The 1998 *Amherst Visions* document identified how

closely the physical and the social are linked in townspeople's minds: "Pursue physical and social linkages as a necessary basis for community". This same document stressed the desired to "serve the underserved". Inclusion and providing community services are uppermost in many town conversations. Becoming a barrier-free community is a priority on which repeated planning and investment have produced good progress, particularly in public buildings and along the Town Center's sidewalk system. The Town recognizes its responsibility to ensure all public and private facilities and programs are accessible to individuals of differing abilities.

The Town, for many years, has leased Town facilities to social service agencies providing childcare and emergency food and clothing. Though this has worked well in the past, this is no longer feasible as the Town cannot continue to pay for expensive capital repairs. The Town will, however, do all it can, including using CDBG funds, to help relocate these important programs. The Town continues to support several area social service agencies with Town funds and is providing funding for a feasibility study to relocate the Amherst Survival Center into a more appropriate facility. The Town will also support a feasibility study that will assess options for housing homeless individuals.

The Master Plan establishes the following:

Amherst is becoming an increasingly diverse community in terms of ethnicity, age, income, education, physical ability, and in many other ways. Amherst's services and facilities must keep pace with the population's changing needs, including maintaining its historically strong schools, planning for needed fire department, public works, school, library, and recreation facilities, and providing critical social support services.

Diversify and expand the economic base.

V. Amherst is the host community for three of the area's five colleges, and an employment center for the region. Over the decades, community planning efforts have consistently stressed a need to increase and diversify non-academic business employment opportunities for Amherst area residents. While the small businesses climate has improved in the Town Center and in some village areas, Amherst's desires to develop research and/or business parks have not yet been realized, largely due to a scarcity of available land that offers both the proper zoning and infrastructure

The Master Plan established the following:

Amherst should pursue policies and regulations that encourage the diversification and expansion of its economic base in a manner consistent with the community's character and desires. This will generate fiscal benefits for the community, provide revenue to pay for community services, create more private sector job opportunities for residents, and reduce dependence on the University and colleges as the economic engines of the community.

Promote an ethic of sustainable environmental and energy practices in all Town activities

VI. It is possible to live and work in Amherst without a car. Amherst has built many of the parts of its envisioned network of pedestrian and bicycle paths connecting and supporting the village centers and open spaces. As an active hub of the Pioneer Valley Transit Authority (PVRTA) system and home of the University of Massachusetts Transit operation, Amherst has supported and invested in public transportation, especially to serve heavy use arteries, such as routes between outlying apartment complexes and the University. Good progress been made on a multi-year plan to complete pedestrian accessibility and streetscape improvements to the Town Center sidewalks and pedestrian areas has made good progress. The longer term goal is to expand and improve the existing downtown sidewalk system to assure pedestrian connections within the downtown, adjacent neighborhoods, and nearby destinations and Village Centers, including sidewalks along the main roadways leading into and out of Town and

Village Centers. Bicycle lanes along Main Street and North East Street, and intersection and sidewalk improvements around East Amherst Village Center are good examples of how transportation choice in Amherst seeks to support the viability of village centers.

The master Plan establishes the following goals:

Improved safety, accessibility, connectivity, and environmental awareness are cross-cutting transportation priorities. In terms of public transportation, the plan seeks to expand transit service in a manner that is more efficient, user-friendly, and environmentally sound. Regarding vehicular transportation the plan aims to develop policies that would reduce dependency on the private automobile, better organize parking in the downtown and village centers, improve traffic flow on major streets, and promote traffic calming in residential areas. Finally, for alternative transportation the plan encourages more walking and biking by improving the pedestrian and bicycling experience in Amherst. The objectives and strategies outlined in Part D address each of these transportation priorities.

The Target Areas for the application include several village centers (North Amherst Village Center, East Amherst Village Center and Pomeroy Lane Village Centers), two other high density residential areas surrounding Village Centers (North Amherst Village Center and Pomeroy Village Center) and one commercial area on a bus route and close to other services (shopping and medical care).

Prioritized List of Projects

The following list contains those specific items that continue to be priorities based on prior planning efforts as well as the current draft Master Plan.

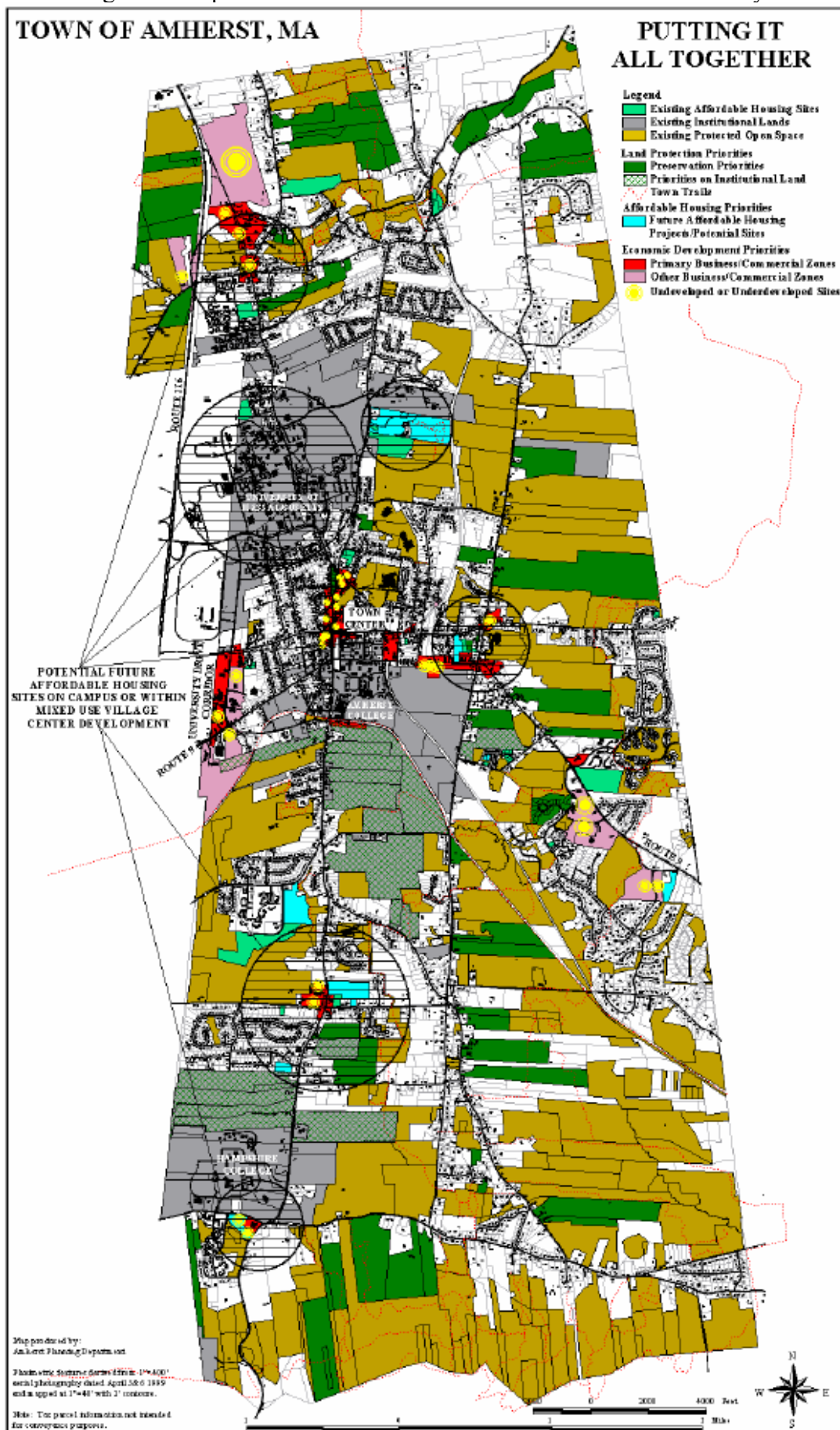
1. Encourage infill to increase density and enhance the Village Center concept, that includes the development of affordable housing options.
2. Continue to plan, design and implement the improvement of Village Center intersections including traffic flow, the streetscape and sidewalks of Village Centers (planning for the West Pomeroy Lane Village Center began in 2006) that will contribute to their revitalization and encourage use for all who frequent this part of town – employees, customers, business owner, residents, drivers, cyclists, pedestrians, and disabled individuals.
3. Continue to make modifications and improvements based on the 2005 *504 Self-Evaluation Survey and Transition Plan* and 2008 *Transition Plan update* regarding sidewalk improvements
4. Through renovation or new construction, include affordable rental housing (including permanent housing for homeless individuals) and home ownership as a vital component of the village centers and Amherst Center based on priorities of the 2003 Affordable Housing Update, included in the Town's approved EO 418 Plan.
5. Create housing options for homeless individuals, including purchase, renovation or construction of housing in and around village centers and other housing developments with low- and moderate-income households.
6. Create “traditional village” zoning districts to implement the Atkins Corner Plan and for broader application town-wide. Make parallel changes in Subdivision Regulations, as needed, to implement those recommendations that involve the creation of new streets.
7. Engage the full diversity of the community in the necessary planning.
8. Encourage and work with the University to build housing on and off campus [beginning with Olympia Drive].
9. Strengthen the partnership between the Town of Amherst and the University of Massachusetts, Amherst College, and Hampshire College.
10. Develop financing strategies that will provide funding to maintain and upgrade the physical condition of existing residential structures, especially when housing is not in compliance with existing building codes, focusing on publicly owned apartment developments as well as single-family, two-family and three-family rental units (i.e. kitchen renovation at

- Chestnut Ct. Apartments owned by the Amherst Housing Authority). This will contribute to sustaining the availability of affordable housing for low and moderate-income households.
11. Marshal financial resources [including Community Preservation Act funds] toward maintaining and creating the desired range and quality of housing opportunity.
 12. Enable and recruit appropriate retail and other business enterprises that enliven downtown and village centers, and serve the community.
 13. Streamline approval processes and change regulations as appropriate.
 14. Identify and preserve scenic, historic, and cultural landmarks.
 15. Reflect the rich artistic/cultural heritage of the built environment through preserved historic buildings, well-lit facades, murals and sculpture gardens, and connecting greenways.
 16. Pursue economic development through infill and rehabilitation of structures, roads, and sidewalks and ensuring that t seeking appropriate uses and scale to reinforce and invigorate village centers, including Town Center, East Village, North Amherst Village, Cushman Village, Echo Village, Pomeroy Village, and Atkins Corner.
 17. Provide Social Services including but not limited to childcare tuition assistance for low/moderate income families, health services, crime prevention, employment counseling, drug abuse education, mental health counseling, financial literacy, welfare services, case management services, youth development services, case coordination services, emergency services, including emergency rental assistance, emergency fuel assistance, emergency shelter, emergency food, information and referral services and other critical information for low-and moderate at-risk families and family planning services. The Town is most concerned with sustaining and expanding current Town funded programs as well as those agencies currently receiving Town funds for some activities. The Town is also interested in providing whatever help it can in preventing foreclosures.
 18. Make available services known through affinity and neighborhood groups, electronic media, multi-lingual brochures and newsletters. [For example, job training for recent immigrants, additional ESL classes, health services, interpretation, transportation, child care.]
 19. Make progress as outlined in the *Amherst Preservation Plan*: physical preservation, documentation, regulation, outreach and advocacy for historic and archeological resources.
 18. Continue to expand the local and regional system of trails and greenways through connections and extensions outlined in the *Open Space Plan*, possibly extending East Amherst Village's trails.
 20. Research, plan, and implement a system of Universal Access trails.
 21. Seek small sites in various locations for the provision or improvement of playgrounds within walking distance of residential areas, as in the case of the East Street School playground.
 22. Add trails that connect Town elementary and secondary schools with residential areas and open spaces.
 23. Over time acquire or dedicate parcels for the construction of outdoor recreation facilities.
 24. Give special attention to diversity when addressing issues such as town growth and housing, social services and schools, arts, recreation, and teen or cultural center.
 25. Provide improvements in infrastructure and utilities as needed to serve concentrated development.
 26. Implement the Towns 504 Transition Plan in ensuring that all public and private facilities and programs are accessible to individuals of differing abilities, including public streets and sidewalks. Also ensure that sidewalks, especially within Village Centers and those leading to and from Village Centers are accessible allowing all to access existing services.
 27. Support First-Time Homebuyer programs that provide financial counseling and financing options for low- and moderate-income households that may include programs that provide mortgage subsidies in the form of deferred payment loans to eligible low- and moderate-income households as well as those that provide foreclosure prevention.

ATTACHMENT I
Bibliography of Amherst's Strategic Development Planning Documents

Comprehensive Plan by Charles Downe [1969]
Final Report of the Select Committee on Goals [SCOG] [1973]
Amherst Local Growth Policy Statement, Growth Management Problems & Priorities [1976]
Overall Economic Development Program [OEDP] Plan [1979]
Growth Management Analysis: A Focus on Residential Growth in Amherst [1984]
Amherst Growth Management Report [1986] [summary only; don't have full e- or hard-copy]
Amherst Farmland Preservation Plan [1987]
Town Center Background Report [October 1991 update of 1985 original]
Downtown Action Plan [1992]
Site inventory for Research/Office/Industrial Parks [July 1993]
Central Business District Access Plan [1994]
Town of Amherst Design Review Board Handbook [1994 revision of 1983 original]
Town Center Parking Report [1996]
A Greenway Network for Amherst: A Model for America [September 5 – October 16, 1997]
Amherst Visions: An Interim Report [1998]
Overall Economic Development Plan: Five Year Update [1999]
West Cemetery Preservation Plan [1999]
Town Center Streetscape Design Guidelines Manual [2001]
Atkins Corner Sustainable Development Master Plan – Action Steps for a Better Amherst
[November 2000 – February 2002]
Build-Out Analysis and Future Growth Study [2002]
Affordable Housing Plan [2003] [Update of the 1992 *Fair Housing Plan*
Amherst Open Space & Recreation Plan [Draft: August 19, 2003, supersedes the 1995 draft OS&RP],
augmented by GIS maps produced during E. O. 418 Community Development Plan Project
Corridor Study: University Drive, State Route 9 to Amity Street [“University Drive Corridor Study”]
[December 2003]
*Amherst Comprehensive Planning Study: Defining Village Boundaries & Open Space Preservation
Strategies* [2004]
Sewer Extension Master Plan [2004]
Amherst Preservation Plan [2004]
Amherst's Draft Master Plan [2008]

The following map summarizes Amherst's Community Development



Strategy.

